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ABSTRACT

Focusing on variables controlled by the newspaper but with emphasis on basic priorities for success rather than specific changes within a department, a study examined intracity battles between newspapers in several cities. A saturation sample of 58 newspapers that competed in various cities with no joint operating agreement or joint ownership was drawn. A list of 20 probable factors of success (including success through people, acquiescence to the community, focus on company image, and manipulation of the familiar) was drawn based on items frequently mentioned in texts and by newspaper officials. A survey of primarily Likert-scale questions was mailed in January 1987 to five officials of each paper (publisher, editor, circulation manager, advertising manager, and marketing director). Respondents rated the items according to their importance for newspaper success. Findings indicated that respondents rated good reporting and writing as the most important factor for a successful newspaper, while the ethnic makeup of their staffs and the balance of sexes was regarded as not important to success. Findings also revealed a significant difference between leading and trailing papers in some items and a preference for qualified people instead of product manipulation as a path for business success. (Three tables of data are attached.) (MM)

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The Newspaper Division and
Media Management and
Economics Interest Group

FACTORS OF SUCCESS FOR NEWSPAPERS IN INTRACITY COMPETITION

by

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Factors of Success for Newspapers in Intracity Competition

Every closing of a major U.S. daily newspaper thuds in the industry, raising a cloud of insecurity, denials of future closing and questions as to why. Much of the news about the survival of daily newspapers has not been good in recent years. The number of dailies has shrunk from over 2,200 in 1910[1] to 1,645 in 1988.[2]

Among the factors leading to closings are the economic pressures caused by changing technologies, the pressures of competition for circulation and advertising revenue, a lack of economic or social need for some newspapers, managerial faults, and planned consolidation of newspapers for various reasons.[3]

Profit margins are stagnant, even for papers that dominate their local markets, and newspaper stocks were among the worst performers of 1988.[4] Additionally, the number of independently owned newspapers has declined from 2,140 in 1910 to 434 in 1987.[5] Major reasons for the reductions in these papers are estate tax laws that induce many heirs to sell papers, family squabbles or lack of a successor among heirs, and lucrative offers to sell from newspaper groups.[6]

An obvious extension of a shrinking number of papers, and fewer independent papers is the reduction in intracity newspaper competitions. In 1985 there were 62 cities with competing dailies. Over half of the papers, however, were jointly owned or jointly operated. Only 28 cities had competing papers with no joint affiliation.[7]

What are the factors for success for papers still in intracity daily competition? For some of them elements of an all-out, old fashion newspaper war continue against a backdrop of contemporary pressure on the newspaper industry. This study is an attempt to identify some factors of success for these newspapers. Additionally this study examines the extent to which managers of these newspapers apply a basic management technique as a means for survival.

Research on competition in the newspaper industry has appeared in the literature for some time, with the term "survival" appearing with increasing frequency in the last two decades. In 1951 Ray[8] noted that the industry offers "conditions of imperfect competition" because opponents do not try to battle with changes in

prices, but by using incentives to increase advertising and subscriptions. Rarick and Hartman[9] analyzed the effects of competition on newspaper content. Schweitzer and Goldman[10] found that readers note little difference in the content of newspapers when there is competition or when there is none.

Lacy [11] looked at the impact of large, daily, monopoly papers on competition with nearby smaller dailies and weeklies. He also studied how the intensity of competition within a city affects the space given to local news and editorial matter.[12] The theoretical framework in both studies developed from Rosse's[13] "umbrella" structure of newspaper competition, which lists four layers of competition: (1) large dailies in a metro center; (2) satellite city newspapers in the circulation zone of layer one; (3) smaller suburban papers with limited circulation zones; and (4) "a grab bag... of weeklies, quasi-newspapers, shopping guides, free distribution papers", etc.

Various approaches to newspaper survival have appeared in the literature in recent years. The first study of a series by the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation on newspaper survival was Bagdikian's[14] report on newspapers that failed between 1961 and 1970. He found that the failure rate for dailies was lower than the national average for commercial and industrial firms, and papers most at risk were those in isolated, smaller cities. Meyer's text[15] on survival urges editors to make better use of research methods and marketing findings, while Willis' book[16] attempts to help journalists better understand the demands on management.

Obviously an unlimited number of variables can affect success. Rosse and Dertouzos[17] list three factors that are "determinants of demand of subscriptions to a newspaper." They are (1) variables controlled or directly influenced by the firm, such as the cost of the paper and the quality of the product; (2) micro-environmental variables, such as number of households in the market and extent of media competition; and (3) macro-environmental variables, such as the general business climate of the city and nation. The industry, understandably, has been largely concerned about matters that fall into the first group: variables that the newspaper can control. Their approaches, however, often focus on spot changes, such as type of features offered, promotions to attract readers, and ways to increase single copy sales.[18]

This study focuses on variables controlled by the newspaper, but with the emphasis on basic priorities for success rather than specific changes within a department. This study follows the Rosse "umbrella" framework, and the Lacy studies, but looks at

competition within layer one: intracity battles. Although Rosse noted that there are few papers that compete within layer one, examinations of their strategies, such as this one, should provide information useful in other layers of competition. A successful newspaper is defined in this study as one that is financially sound and serves its area with a publication of recognized journalistic quality. Four questions related to the survival of newspapers in direct competition are explored here.

First, how do newspaper executives rank 20 items identified by news personnel and presented in management texts as critical areas for determining success? Many texts, including works by Fink,[19] Giles,[20] Rankin,[21] and Sohn et.al.,[22] have chapters on managing personnel and on the major divisions of a newspaper. Newspaper executives express concerns about broad areas, such as the major divisions, as well as such focused matters as the cost of the paper. This aspect of the study would look at the weight that executives assign to some of the most important factors.

Second, what major differences, if any, are there in the way executives from five major areas of the newspaper rank the factors of success? Executives whose functions differ significantly can often develop very different ideas about what success requires. Peters and Waterman[23] noted that a characteristic of successful companies is that personnel in diverse arms of the organization share the companies philosophies and goals. The newspaper, by tradition, offers an environment in which the editorial and business employees often seem to be at odds in their approaches. This study would see if there are indications of major disunity in priorities.

Third, is there a significant difference in the way that leading papers rank items, as compared to the papers trailing in their markets? Ranking in the market, fierceness of competition, and the way in which a paper has chosen to position itself in the market will affect responses, but the comparison of the two groups should offer some indication of aggregate differences in their approaches to success.

Fourth, do executives rank "people items" ahead of "product items" that could affect the paper's prosperity? For at least two decades business management has noted McGregor's theories of authoritarian versus decentralized management. His "theories of X and Y" suggested that businesses that place a priority on showing confidence in employees will be more successful than those that assume "the mediocrity of the masses," and rely on strict, top level management.[24] These theories were repopularized in the book, *In Search of Excellence*.[25] One newspaper executive expressed this

general concept when he said a key to success is to, "Find good employees, then let them do their jobs."[26]

In addition to learning the general ranking of factors of success, and comparing rankings by officials of various newspaper components, the following hypotheses will be tested:

1) A significant difference will be found in the ranking by publishers of factors of success by papers leading in the market, and those that are trailing.

2) News executives will rank "people" items higher than "product" items.

Method

A saturation sample of newspapers that compete in the same city with no joint operating agreement or joint ownership was drawn. This method did not include papers that were listed as based in one city, even though they compete heavily in another city. Of the twenty-eight cities found, all but two had two competing papers. Los Angeles and New York each had three papers, for a sample of 58 newspapers. There were papers with circulations near or exceeding 1 million, such as the New York dailies. Then there was Slidell, La. where the *Daily Times* circulated to 5,324 and the *Sentry News* reached 6,719. In some cases the competition was close, such as the *Anchorage Daily News* (48,077) and the *Anchorage Times* (43,121). In other cases "competition" was mostly in theory, such as the *Washington Post* (728,857) and the *Washington Times* (75,576).

A list of twenty probable factors of success was drawn based on items frequently mentioned in texts and by newspaper officials. Respondents were asked to rate the items according to their importance to newspaper success. Table one shows that seven of the items (a,h,p,t,e,d,i) represent the concept of good people doing quality work. Major newspaper divisions: circulation, marketing, and advertising, are represented in three of those items. The editorial section is implied in "skilled reporting and writing" and "outstanding page design and graphics." The other two items, on the management staff and talented personnel throughout, are broader endorsements of quality people.

Three items (b,j,o), on demographics desired by advertisers, editorial stance, and approval of business leaders, indicate some acquiescence to the community, particularly business interests. Item g, "a good reputation," stands almost in opposition to any form of catering. Three other items (q,k,l), on profits, production costs, and legal suits, represent management's concern for the bottom line. Four items (c,n,r,s), addressing technological changes, material selection, speed in getting the news, and paper price, are ways of

manipulating the product that are often grasped as keys to success. Finally, two items were added as a barometer of the importance of demographics of newspaper staffs. One item (f) derived from reporting of a perceived "pink collar ghetto," caused by the increasing number of women in newsrooms. Another item (m) was a possible check of attitudes on racial and ethnic diversity twenty years after the Kerner Commisssion report.

A survey of primarily Likert scale questions was mailed in January 1987 to five officials of each paper, or as many of the designated officials as were listed in Editor & Publisher Yearbook. The officials were the publisher, editor, circulation manager, advertising manager, and marketing director. Responses were returned from all but two of the cities, for a 97 percent return, and from 80 of the 230 officials, a 35 percent response.

Publishers responded in the greatest number (23). Some other officials who returned surveys indicated that they preferred to have responses come from their publishers. Advertising managers had the second highest response rate (20), followed by editors (13), and circulation and marketing directors (12 each). The *Dallas Morning News* was the only paper from which all five executives responded.

The aggregate results of the survey were computed by mean scores to tabulate the lists of rankings and to compare people-versus-product items. The comparison of responses by different groups of excutives was made by inspection. The comparison of leading and trailing newspapers was made by a t test drawn on publishers responses.

Results

The item designated as most important in Table 2 was skilled reporting and writing. It was ranked first by three of the management groups: publishers, editors, and advertising managers. Marketing managers listed writing as the second most important item, after a solid management staff.

Circulation managers ranked writing third. They indicated that three other items, the management staff, circulation group and the paper's reputation, were more important than writing and reporting.

The next five items on the cumulative ranking were people items. All of the people items, therefore, were in the top third of the rankings. Of the staff positions, a talented management staff was rated most important and marketing was rated least important. Marketers ranked themselves as item seven, lower than the cumulative ranking which placed them as item six. They were held in highest esteem by the circulation managers, who ranked

marketing number four. The item indicating overall staff quality (e), ranked fourth on the cumulative list.

An interesting outcome in the top third of the rankings was placement of "a good reputation." The item (g), which tied for fourth, received its lowest ranking from publishers, and its highest ranking from circulation managers.

The second tier of items (7-12) was divided between editorial and business considerations. Two ways that are often used to affect readership were in this group: (n) selection of material printed, and (r) being first with the news. Two items that could be seen as acquiescence to the community also appeared in the section: (b) the demograhics desired by advertisers, and (j) an editorial stance that reflects the city's mood.

Operational considerations, such as production costs, legal suits, and the price of the paper were listed in the lower third of the ranking. Staff demographics, that is representation of racial and ethnic groups and a balance of males and females, were listed at the bottom of the ranking. Those two items were also listed last or among the bottom three by every management group. Editors included the approval of local leaders (item o) as their second to last item. Marketing managers included production costs (item k) among the last items.

Although no item received a uniform rating by the various managers, newspaper personnel did not record extreme differences. Occasionally one group differed by several placements of an item, but for the most part the variance was small.

Table 3 shows that there was little difference in the rankings selected by publishers of leading and trailing newspapers. Three statistically significant differences emerged in the t test however. The greatest difference is in the attitudes toward having a staff that is similar to the ethnic makeup of the city, which was significant at the $p \leq .01$ level. Two other items, a desired balance between m/f staffers and a good reputation, were significant at the $p \leq .025$ level. In all cases the items were rated more important by publishers of leading papers than by publishers whose papers trailed in their market.

Discussion

The results are good news for reporters, editors and journalism teachers. In a period of increasing interest in various techniques to draw readers, these executives say that good reporting and writing is still the most important factor in having a successful paper. Further good news is in the general agreement by various managers that reporting and writing is of utmost importance to a

newspapers success. The item did not finish lower than third on any list.

There is also good news for the concept of qualified people producing a successful business. "People" items were in the top third of the survey results. Executives relied on a good management staff as the second most important factor for a successful paper. Other staff items followed at the top of the twenty items.

The worst news could be found in the attitudes expressed toward the demographics of newspaper staffs. Respondents indicated that the ethnic makeup of their staffs and the balance of sexes was not important to success. Not only did the two items finish last in the cumulative rating, but their rankings by each group were among the most consistent of any items on the list. They were almost uniformly last or second to last.

In the comparison of leading and trailing newspapers, a different story emerged. The unexpected finding was that publishers of leading papers are more likely to consider the demographics of their staffs important, than do publishers of trailing papers. The demographic items did not appear in the top half on any ranking in this study, but they were ranked significantly higher by leading papers than by trailing papers. It should be noted that the phrasing of the question on male/female staffers does not necessarily call for a 50-50 percent staff proportion.

It is also significant that "a good reputation" was tied as the most important item for leading papers. A good reputation ranked number 7 on the list by trailing papers. It was ranked after the need to draw readers whose demographics were what the advertisers wanted.

The latter finding makes it easy to suggest that certain factors for success are clear. A paper's priorities should be good reporting and writing, and a good reputation. News executives should also seek to have a staff that is ethnically similar to the city and has some balance of men and women. There are other legitimate interpretations, however. In some cases the papers trailing in this study are within striking distance of market leadership. Many other papers trail by a large percent of the market, and some are close to failing. Under such tight economic conditions, executives might feel pressured to seek to please advertisers for immediate survival, rather than taking steps that could build long-term gains.

Finally, it must be remembered that the survey provides an indication of what executives say, not necessarily what they do.

Conclusions

The results of the study not only provide a ranking of some significant factors of success among items controlled by the newspaper, but also an indications that newspaper officers are not too different in the way they view the items. These results also support the two hypotheses. There was a significant difference between leading papers and trailing papers in three items, and there was a preference for qualified people, instead of product manipulation as a path to business success.

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[1]Edwin Emery and Michael Emery, The Press and America (4th edition, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1978), pp. 430, 436.

[2] *Editor and Publisher International Yearbook,* (New York: Editor & Publisher Co., Inc., 1988).

[3] Emery and Emery, op cit., p. 431.

[4] Subrata N. Chakraverty with Carolyn Torcellini., "Citizen Kane meets Adam Smith," *Forbes*, February 20, 1989.

[5] Mary A. Anderson, "Ranks of Independent Newspapers Continue to Fade," *Presstime*, August 1987, p. 17.

[6]Ibid, p. 17.

[7]*Editor and Publisher International Yearbook*, 1985. The 28 cities were Anchorage, Little Rock, Livermore, Ca.; Los Angeles, Sacramento, Colorado Springs, Denver, Manchester, Conn.; Washington, D.C.; Palm Beach, Fl.; Chicago, Slidell, La.; Boston, Columbia, Mo.; Las Vegas, Trenton, N.J..; New York, Scranton, Pa.; Wilkes-Barre, Pa.; York, Pa.; Cookeville, Tn.; Kingsport, Tn.; Dallas, Houston, Loredo, San Antonio, Arlington, Va.; and Green Bay. The Detroit papers were not included because efforts to create a joint operating agreement were being litigated.

[8]Royal H. Ray,"Competition in the Newspaper Industry, "The Journal of Marketing, 15:444-50(April 1951).

[9]Galen Rarick and Barrie Hartman, "The Effects of Competition on One Daily Newspaper's Content," Journalism Quarterly, 43:459-63(Fall 1966).

[10]John C. Schweitzer and Elaine Goldman, "Does Newspaper Competition Make a Difference to Readers? Journalism Quarterly, 52: 706-710

[11]Stephen Lacy, "Monopoloy Metropolitian Dailies and Inter-City Competition," Journalism Quarterly, 62:640-644 (Autum 1985).

[12]Stephen Lacy, "The Impact of Intercity Competition on Daily Newspaper Content," Journalism Quarterly, 65:399-406 (Summer 1988).

[13]James Rosse, "Economic Limits of Press Responsibility," Discussion Paper, Stanford University: Studies in Industry Economics, No. 56, 1975.

[14]Ben H. Bagdikian, "Report of an Exaggerated Deqth: Daily Newspapers that Failed, 1961-1970," Report No. 1, The Newspaper Survival Study, Oakland, Calif., YEAR

[15]Philip Meyer, The Newspaper Survival Book, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

[16]Jim Willis, Surviving in the Newspaper Business: Newspaper Management in Turbulent Times, (NewYork: Praeger, 1988).

[17]James N. Rosse and James N. Dertouzos, "The Evolution of One Newspaper Cities," Proceedings of the Sumposium on Media Concentration (Washington,D.C.: Federal Trade Commission, Bureau of Competition, 1978) p. 451.

[18]"Success Stories: What 28 newspapers are doing to gain and retain readers," sponsored by the American Newspaper Publishers Association, et.al August, 1988.

[19] Conrad C. Fink, Strategic Newspaper Management, (New York: Random House) 1988.

[20] Robert H. Giles, Newsroom Management: A Guide to Theory and Practice, (Indianapolis, Indiana: R.J. Berg & Company, Inc.) 1987.

[21] W. Parkman Rankin, The Practice of Newspaper Management, (New York: Praeger, 1986).

[22] Ardyth Broadrick Sohn, Christine L. Ogan, and John Polich, Newspaper Leadership, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1986).

[23] Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman,Jr., In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best Run Companies (New York: Warner Books, 1982) p. 96.

[24] Douglas McGregor, The Human Side of Enterprise (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1960), p. 34.

[25] Op. cit.

[26]Personal interview, Clifton D. Camp, former St. Petersburg Times vice president and business manager, May, 1986.

Table 1

Categories of Success Factors

Twenty items could be grouped to indicate newspaper managers' pre-set for seeking success.

Success through People

a. Good (skilled, motivated) advertising people
h. A qualified, motivated management staff
p. A talented, motivated marketing team
t. An enthusiastic, skilled circulation group
e. Enthusiastic, talented personnel throughout
d. Skilled, accurate and complete reporting and writing
i. Outstanding page design and graphics

Acquiescence to the Community

b. Favorable demographics: Your readers are the market that advertisers want
j. An editorial stance that reflects the city's mood
o. The approval of local business leaders

Focus on Company Image

g. A good reputation

Concern for the Bottom Line

q. Net profits desired by management
k. Low production costs (supplies, salaries, etc.)
l. Freedom from legal suits (good legal advice and a prudent staff

Manipulation of the Familiar

c. Latest technology in printing equipment, etc.
n. A good selection of material printed
r. Being first with the news
s. The price of the paper

Adjustment of Staff Demographics

m. Representation of ethnic groups on staff similar to their proportion in the city
f. A desired (comfortable to you) balance of male and female staffers

Table 2

Newspaper Executives' Ratings of Factors for Success

The publishers, editors, advertising managers, marketing managers and circulation managers of newspapers that compete in the same city with separately owned and operated papers were given a list of 20 factors that could influence a newspaper's success and asked to rate them. A "successful paper" was defined as one that is financially sound and serves its area with a publication of recognized journalistic quality. Below are the cumulative responses.

Cumulative Rankings n = 80	Publishers n = 23	Editors n = 13	Circulations n = 12	Advertising n = 20	Marketing n = 12
1. d. Skilled, accurate and complete reporting and writing	1	1	3	1	2
2. h. A qualified, motivated management staff	2	2	1	3	1
3. t. An enthusiastic, skilled circulation group	4	7	1	2	2
4. e. Enthusiastic, talented personnel throughout	3	3	6	6	4
g. A good reputation	7	4	2	5	5 *
5. a. Good (skilled, motivated) advertising people	6	8	5	4	3 *
6. p. A talented, motivated marketing team	8	6	4	7	7
7. n. A good selection of material printed	9	5	7	11	6
8. b. Favorable demographics: Your readers are the market that advertisers want	5	9	9	10	5 *
9. q. Net profits desired by management	10	12	10	8	5 *
10. r. Being first with the news	12	10	8	9	8
11. i. Outstanding page design and graphics	13 *	11	15	13 *	9
12. j. An editorial stance that reflects the city's mood	13 *	13	11 *	13 *	11
13. k. Low production costs (supplies, salaries, etc.)	11	12 *	13	16 *	15
c. Latest technology in printing equipment, etc.	14 *	14	12	14	10
14. l. Freedom from legal suits (good legal advice and a prudent staff)	15 *	15 *	14	12	13
15. o. The approval of local business leaders	14 *	17	11 *	15	14
16. s. The price of the paper	14 *	16 *	16	16 *	12
17. m. Representation of ethnic groups on staff similar to their proportion in the city	15 *	15 *	17	17	14
18. f. A desired (comfortable to you) balance of male and female staffers	16	16 *	18	18	16

Table 3

Comparison of Publishers' Responses: Papers that Lead in the Market vs Those That Trail

Cumulative Rankings by Newspaper Executives n= 80	Leading Publishers n=8		Trailing Publishers n=15		Unpaired t value
	Rank	Mean Score	Rank	Mean Score	
1. d. Skilled, accurate and complete reporting and writing	1	4.75	1	4.6	.471
2. h. A qualified, motivated management staff	2	4.63	2	4.47	.535
3. t. An enthusiastic, skilled circulation group	5	4.5	4	4.27	.679
4. e. Enthusiastic, talented personnel throughout	4	4.51	3	4.33	.478
g. A good reputation	1	4.75	7	3.87	2.23 p≤.025
5. a. Good (skilled, motivated) advertising people	6	4.25	4	4.27	-.054
6. p. A talented, motivated marketing team	9	3.88	5	4.2	-.775
7. n. A good selection of material printed	8	4.13	8	3.73	.878
8. b. Favorable demographics: Your readers are the market that advertisers want	3	4.57	6	4.14	1.10
9. q. Net profits desired by management	7	4.17	9	3.71	1.06
10. r. Being first with the news	10	3.75	10	3.53	.372
11. i. Outstanding page design and graphics	11	3.5	11	3.2	.679
12. j. An editorial stance that reflects the city's mood	11	3.5	11	3.2	.589
13. k. Low production costs (supplies, salaries, etc.)	13	3.28	7	3.87	-1.059
c. Latest technology in printing equipment, etc.	12	3.38	14	2.93	1.01
14. l. Freedom from legal suits (good legal advice and a prudent staff	15	3	13	3	0
15. o. The approval of local business leaders	15	3	12	3.07	-.775
16. s. The price of the paper	14	3.25	14	2.93	.622
17.m. Representation of ethnic groups on staff similar to their proportion in the city	9	3.88	16	2.5	2.81 p≤.01
18. f. A desired (comfortable to you) balance of male and female staffers	11	3.5	15	2.53	2.28 p≤.025